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## Why do People Riot? Understanding the micro-level processes motivating Hindu-Muslim Riots in India

**Principal Investigators:** Soundarya Chidambaram

Since its partition in 1947, India has experienced a rise in Hindu-Muslim violence. Despite the large social and economic strains that riots place on the Indian state and society, violence occurs frequently in India's northern and western cities.

Soundarya Chidambaram explores the factors that provoke people to participate in ethnic violence. She investigates the causes and nature of such violence, asking:

- Why do people decide to riot?
- What factors determine why, when, and where riots are likely to occur?
- How do these factors shape people's motivation to riot as members of an ethnic group?

Funding from Mershon Center allowed Chidambaram to make a pre-dissertation trip to New Delhi, India, to evaluate the validity of her focus, refine her theory through interviews, and collect initial data on specific cases of violence.

Chidambaram interviewed representatives of non-governmental organizations that help rehabilitate riot victims, journalists who write about riots in leading national daily papers, and political science faculty members at Jawaharlal Nehru University who study ethnic violence.

Chidambaram developed a fruitful relationship with Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust (SAHMAT), an NGO based in New Delhi. This organization helps riot victims by providing economic and legal aid, as well as opportunities for victims to discuss their experiences in public forums to raise awareness about the nature, severity, and consequences of ethnic violence.



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In 2002, SAHMAT sent several fact-finding teams to riot-torn districts in the immediate aftermath of violence in the western state of Gujarat. Chidambaram met with officials from these teams, gaining insight about the direct effects of rioting. SAHMAT members also gave her access to their library, which contains observer reports, first-person accounts by riot victims, and other documents of riot-related research.

Initial findings and interviews revealed the need for Chidambaram to re-evaluate her preliminary research focus. She realized the importance of studying the role that politics plays in rioting in India. In particular, she will focus on the links between riots and elections, political party strategies, and actions of political elites at the state level.

Evidence shows that Hindu-Muslim riots in India are often used as an electoral strategy, to influence election results and win victories for opportunistic parties, especially on the right of the political spectrum. Although most scholars agree that political elites often use violence to gain electoral advantage, such tactics have been studied as unique cases, not as part of an overall mass mobilization strategy.

Chidambaram wants to investigate the reasons political leaders choose to emphasize ethnic relations over policy issues, or decide to diffuse "hate propaganda" rather than information about party stances. By seeing political tactics as part of the reason behind rioting, Chidambaram will explore how the choices of political leaders can either escalate or stop the spread of ethnic violence in India.

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